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PROVIDENCE IN FLORENCE

BY STARK YOUNG

FOR our first day in the pension on the Arno the only other guest at our table was an American young lady. We had been told that the other guests were out for the day. But both my friend and I were so worn with the table amenities of our Assisi headquarters that we felt like holding to a prudent silence. I meant to be polite, precisely that. And so we were seated, said good evening carefully, and busied ourselves with the dinner. Two courses passed and only a few murmurs between my friend and me. Then the young lady took the situation in hand and wholly shamed us. She looked up and smiled at us and said:

“How long will you gentlemen be in the city?”

I started. “In the city!” Who would have ever thought of that for Florence? And “you gentlemen!” But I replied that we hoped to be there for some time.

“I see you are from the States, are you not?” she went on with the straight manner of a war girl, evidently. “I am in the Red Cross here.”

We explained ourselves and that we were travelling. She was a tall girl with auburn, crimped hair; honest freckles sprinkled on the bridge of her nose; and a figure in a long high corset. She had a quick way of talking, slightly indistinct even to an American.

Then, shortly afterward, the happy mention of antiques and of buying in general started us all off, at the beginning at least, together. The young lady, it developed, drew her salary, and also her allowance, in American money, which she turned into lire at 22 on the dollar. That made her rich beyond her dreams. She was thrilled with the buying. Did you ever see anything like it in your life? Wasn't it terrible in Italy? What did you think she had paid for this dress? Sixteen dollars, made on Via Tornabuoni! Her house at home was very plain, just mis-

sion furniture and blue and white curtains, not bad, but you know. And so she was buying all sorts of things, and Auntie would be delighted.

It appeared that she had bought a hat for two dollars; and had found copies of all her favorite pictures at the print shop for ten lire each, less than fifty cents! After dinner she showed us cigarette cases, majolica, lace, table linen, filet, cameos, frames, pictures, mosaics, every sort of thing. I perceived that she had orders out all over Florence and seemed to have her lacemakers, woodcarvers, milliners, jewellers, and bookbinders, like a great Medici princess. Sometimes, she confessed, she did not like the things afterwards so much as she had when she bought them.

The next day at luncheon the Conte appeared. He was a man past thirty, compact, alert, almost short in stature, with auburn hair and mustache. His eyes were quick and grey; he wore on his right hand a sardonyx ring with arms. His beautiful, rapid Siennese was clear as a pattern in a book and recklessly elegant and witty. The Conte's name was one of the oldest in Italy and his arms were scattered over all Rome, by one of the Popes that had come from his family.

The Conte bowed and wished everyone a good evening as he sat down at the table, and explained that he had been absent in Pistoia, where he had gone to look after a palace that had been left him by his ancestors, damp, dark, with one caretaker and thirty-eight apartments, and fit for nothing but growing mushrooms. "One wears these palaces exactly as one wears this ring," he added, holding up his right hand, "but the ring is less trouble. I shall try to leave nothing but rings and bankstock behind me. Let us be modern!"

He relapsed then into his *ravioli*, after a glance at the Red Cross young lady, who was plainly about to begin an account.

She began to tell me about her life, official so to speak, in Florence. She was in the office at the top of Berchielli's all day. But there was every sort of thing to be done: people to be found; connections established between members of families; pension money sent to the right people. Then there were inquiries to go to Washington, and goodness knows when you got an answer and the people coming every day and making a row.

There were all sorts of passport troubles for old people who wished to go to America, and for ex-soldiers who were trying to dodge the clutches of the Italian army. And then at four you had tea sent up from the hotel and went shopping. Sometimes on Saturday nights she ran off to Rome to see her friends in the office there, taking the midnight express and getting back for Monday morning. And whenever she heard of a festival in the near-by towns, she went. They were adorable, the procession at Grassina, and the festival she had seen at Moncepulciano, where they led a little child dressed in white, with a golden wig and a wreath of flowers, like a little angel, and standing on an ass, right down the valley into the town and into the church and up to the altar. She had even been to Paestum, where she had spent the night in a peasant's house. She had gone to tell them about their son; for they could not read at all the information sent them in English from Washington, and nobody in the village could read it, but the priest knew that it was English. Why did Washington do this? She loved the church, though they seemed like pagans and Auntie would be shocked. And she adored walking up through the Porto San Giorgio to hear the nightingales when the moon was out. Alfano, her Florentine friend, often went with her, he had been thirteen months in prison in Austria and was so interesting. It was so interesting getting to know the real Italian nature this way!

The Conte listened and looked at me, and his clear eyes flickered for half a second; but he said nothing. She turned to him:

"Oh, Conte, you have such a wonderful country," she said radiantly, "I simply love it."

"We are fortunate that you help to make it so," he answered with a little bow to her. "What extraordinarily happy lives American ladies lead, *cara Signorina*."

Dinner that night proved not to be for those that dream international dreams. Two ladies had arrived in the afternoon and had been seated at our table next to the plump little Austrian baroness who had been absent for the day in the too sweet environs, as she called them. One of the arrivals was from New York, a miniature painter, with clear features and firm sharp motions that suggested a Colonial doorknocker. Beside her

sat the Irish lady, whom she had met a day or two before in Perugia. This lady had thick grey hair like a powdered wig, round eyes far apart, and flattish nostrils, round and wide. "A Louis Quinz mule!" the Conte said to me later, when we were better friends.

At the beginning of the dinner while the anchovy *antipasto* was served, the painter, merely by way of conversation, I think, asked in her cool, clear voice:

"Miss Townshend, I suppose of course you are a Home Ruler?"

"You do?" Miss Townshend put down her fork and roared at her friend with a huge voice and a manner like a stump orator. "Did you ever hear of a Townshend who was a Home Ruler?"

A pause.

"Did you ever hear of a Townshend who was a Catholic?"

A pause, and this time silence in the whole dining-room, to hear what the lady was roaring about in this fashion.

"Did you ever hear of a Townshend who was a —?"

"I never heard of a Townshend," the painter interrupted, coolly, and went back to her anchovies.

The dining-room went back to its clatter, but an awkward silence reigned at our table.

But the Providence young lady had not worked for nothing with consuls and parents and Latin officials.

"Why, I'm sure I've heard of lots of Townshends," she said, and added enthusiastically, "Some of them were historical heroes, weren't they?"

Miss Townshend lowered her voice a little as she answered, "If they spell it with an *h*, Madame, I think I may say there were."

The Conte saw the point of the American young lady's efforts with this hardened old clay of Europe, and joined in gaily toward the peace basis. He had already had two round goblets of Capri Bianco.

"Speaking of heroes," he began, "now what's one's idea of a hero? How many ideals there are! Now my ideal is a man like Nerino Gamba. You have not heard of him? But he is known as a financier, a patron of the arts, an impresario, a director of theatres, a prince."

"Indeed," I asked, "where is he, in Rome?"

"No, just now he is in the prison at Volterra. For forging checks. Yes, *Signorina*, that is the way he started his fortune. This is the way he used to do it. He would find out a very rich man, one with a name that could be duplicated of course, some not unique name, and then he would get a secretary with the same name. He would have this secretary write out checks and these he would cash. And since he was a great and rich person no one thought of making trouble for him for a long time. He changed secretaries when there was need for more money some time or other, and got thus another rich man's name. In this way he became very rich and bought up many objects of art. Have you not heard of the Crivelli that he has, that they tried to buy in America? At any rate he loved the theatre and so financed a great many companies, and gave the actresses whom he loved magnificent gifts. And now that he is caught they have all had to give the things up to be sold for the creditors, is it not terrible, poor women! All but Mimi Grammatica, she was more fortunate; he had given her only money, fifty thousand lire, and she had spent it all, and now they could not get any of it back from her. It is droll, and what a great actress she is! Nerino Gamba has been in prison two years now—they had to do something about it of course, but he was given only three years. He is planning now for several fine companies in the theatres, directing them from prison, and he will soon be out and making his career again. Now that is what I call a hero!"

The Red Cross young lady looked at him blankly.

"Why not, *cara Signorina*, he has brains, power, imagination, daring, taste, what would you have?"

"But of course you are only joking," she laughed.

"Oh, no, no, no, no, not at all!" the Conte waved his hand, "I assure you. This man is like Machiavelli, the intention, the cool mind."

The young lady's face became very serious.

"Oh, if you really mean it, Conte," she said, "I can't let you go on thinking like that. It's so cynical."

"Exactly, *cara Signorina*, it is cynical. It is Continental," the Conte replied gravely. "It is Italian. We are a cynical race, we have three thousand years of history behind us."

The honest young face looked troubled and slightly indignant; this sort of problem that cannot be changed by believing in the best was not to her taste. She thought a moment.

"Well, I just don't understand Italians," she said then, "but I suppose I never shall do that. It just shows that America is the place for me after all."

"On the contrary," the Conte answered, bowing again, "let us hope that you can be in both, in both countries at the same time even, like the holy Apostles."

"Well, I don't quite understand even my friends in Italy," she said, now very serious, "Now even Alfano, he is different from my—"

"Oh, Alfano?" the Conte interrupted. "Ah, I know Alfano. And I know his ex-wife. But how beautiful the moon is from San Giorgio!"

"His wife? Why, is he married?" the girl asked quickly.

"Alfano *was* married. He is not married now, *cara Signorina*."

I could see that this was a great shock to her, but her frontier American control, or whatever good thing it was, helped her to go straight ahead without a blink.

"Really, Conte?" she said. "Well, I was going to say that Alfano is so different from a friend of mine at home—"

At this the Austrian baroness came in sympathetically; romance was her only connection with life.

"You mean your *fiancé*, dear Mademoiselle?"

"Yes, Baroness." This time she flushed crimson.

"Now that is too pretty!" the Baroness cooed. "Do tell us about him. What is he like?"

"He's a big fine fellow," the girl said, proudly.

"Ah, yes, a beeg fine fellow," the Baroness repeated, "now there, *ma chère*, I do not quite understand you. Why is it that American young ladies have told me so often of the beeg fine fellow? With us the beegest men are the porters. It is too droll but we learn from the animal kingdom that the most intelligent animal is the ant, and he is the smallest. The elephant is the beegest animal and all the sense he has is to deeg a hole in the ground and put his foot in it."

"But we must not spoil the signorina's dreams!" the Conte proffered quickly.

"Oh, you don't at all, I think it's very interesting. You see I've got used to being in foreign countries."

"And so you wouldn't like an Italian husband?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't sound very polite, Conte—"

The Conte made a little, martyr's gesture not to be spared.

"But I'm afraid I don't think I should. I suppose it's only natural that an American girl should prefer an American husband."

"I know, *cara Signorina*, but that does not say that they are superior."

"I'm sure they are, just the same." She was getting a little excited with the argument.

"And why, *Signorina*?"

"Well, for one thing, you know how Italian husbands act. And nobody seems to mind about these affairs, everybody takes it for granted. Our husbands are different, *that* you can certainly say for them. They are not like—American husbands are faithful."

"Exactly, *cara Signorina*," the Conte answered, "of course they are faithful. But what good are they?"

The young lady was floored. She had never thought of this approach to the argument. "Yes, but—I mean—" she murmured, and made a little laugh, and retreated, for the time being, to her cherries.

The Baroness began to lisp about a visit she had made that morning to San Domenico—it was too sweet—and the lovely brother there in a black cowl who had given her a rose.

STARK YOUNG.